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**Pilot Program Helps Keep Families Intact
DCS and DHS partner for Families First Kinship Care program**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - The Tennessee Department of Children's Services and the Tennessee Department of Human Services have partnered to initiate Families First Kinship Care, a pilot program, effective April 1, 2005, that provides additional support for families in three DCS regions. The goal of the program is to encourage placements with relatives for children who are at risk of removal from their home and who otherwise would be placed in state custody.

"This inter-agency partnership shows that DCS and DHS are committed to the preservation of families by making the resources and supports available to help ensure that at-risk children remain in familiar, suitable surroundings whenever possible," said DCS Commissioner Viola P. Miller. "Keeping the family intact as much as possible makes what is often an emotionally trying and transitional period for children less disruptive."

"This is an excellent example of departments marshaling their resources to help mutual clients meet a critical need," added DHS Commissioner Virginia T. Lodge. "The human and financial costs of foster care greatly exceed the cost of a pilot project like this. The Families First Kinship Care program will hopefully enable more children to remain with family members who know, love and want to take care of them."

Participating regions are Davidson, Shelby and Upper Cumberland, which includes Fentress, Cumberland, Clay, Putnam, Jackson, Warren, White, Macon, Smith, Overton, Van Buren, Cannon, Dekalb and Pickett counties. Approximately 225 children in these counties will be served during the six-month pilot program period. Eligible families will receive monthly payments to help offset the costs of caring for a child.

"Through the pilot, we want to support the care of children who are at risk of coming into state custody by offering financial support to relative caregivers who are willing to provide safe and nurturing homes for these children, but need additional financial resources in order to do so," said Shalonda Cawthon, DCS director of kinship support.

Eligibility will be determined by DCS, which will assess the child being at risk of entering state custody, the caregiver being within the fifth degree relationship to the child, the caregiver being the primary caregiver of the child, the biological parent not residing in the home where the child is in the care of the relative, and a means test of family income.

"These arrangements allow children to remain connected to their family and community," Cawthon said.

The Tennessee Department of Children's Services was established in 1996 to provide the best possible care for children and youth who are in state custody, or at significant risk of entering custody, and their families. Services provided by DCS include child protective services, foster care, adoption, programs for delinquent youth, probation/aftercare, and treatment and rehabilitation programs for identified youth.

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